

CLARK

Notes on the Personal Essay
in America 1840-1860

English

A. M.

1907

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
LIBRARY

Class

1907

Book

C54

Volume

Je 07-10M





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

<http://archive.org/details/notesonpersonale00clar>

**NOTES ON THE PERSONAL ESSAY IN
AMERICA, 1840-1860**

BY
ANGIE RAY CLARK, A. B., 1904

THESIS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
IN ENGLISH
IN THE
GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

1907

1907
C54

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

May 31 1907

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Angie Ray Clark, A. B.

ENTITLED Notes on the Personal Essay in America, 1840-1860

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF Master of Arts.

Daniel Kilham Dodge

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF English

101664



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- * Emerson, R.W. Essays; series 1, 1841; series 2, 1844.

 English Traits. 1856.

 Conduct of Life. 1860
- Mitchell, D. G. Reveries of a Bachelor. 1850.

 Dream Life. 1851.
- * Lowell, J. R. Moosehead Journal. 1853.

 Leaves from my Journal. 1854.

 Cambridge Thirty Years Ago. 1844.
- Curtis, G. W. Prue and I. 1856.

 Nine Notes of a Howadji. 1851.

 The Howadji in Syria. 1852.
- * Holmes, O. W. Autocrat at the Breakfast Table. 1858.

 Professor at the Breakfast Table. 1860

* Riverside Press Series.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brewer, D. J. ed. World's Best Essays. 1900.
- Burton, Richard. Forces in Fiction and Other Essays. 1902
- Griswold, R. W. Prose Writers of America. 1870.
- Moulton, C. W. Library of Literary Criticism. 1901-04.
- National Cyclopedia of American Biography. 1898.
- Pancoast, H.S. Introduction to American Literature. 1900
- Richardson, C. F. American Literature. 1889.
- Stedman, E. C. & Hutchinson, E. M. Library of American
Literature. 1896.
- Whitcomb, S. L. Chronological Outlines of American
Literature. 1894.

NOTES ON THE PERSONAL ESSAY IN AMERICA, 1840-1860

Since the literature of any country or of any period is vitally influenced by the economic conditions of that country or period, we should not be surprised to find the beginnings of American literature delayed for many years after the settlement of the colonies. Our forefathers were too busy overcoming the great obstacles which confronted them in this new world to find time for those literary pursuits that naturally come only with leisure and comfortable circumstances. The earliest writings in America which were utilitarian rather than literary comprise sermons, religious tracts, poems and political articles for the instruction of the colonists. Descriptions of the new country and accounts of travel were written by the settlers for the benefit of their friends at home, but real literary productions do not come until much later.

In the later colonial period, during the years just preceding the Revolutionary War, the attention of the people turned toward political questions at the expense of the religious discussions and treatises that had predominated in the earlier period. After the adoption of the constitution, there followed a period of growth and expansion, and in this period, literature, which had already received some attention, attracted more notice, and many books of prose and poetry--some of them of real value--were written. The period immediately preceding the Civil War--a period of great material prosperity--is one

of the richest in the history of our literature. Since 1865 we have made a wonderful advance in material development and the prosperous condition of the country has given opportunity for greater literary work. This very brief sketch of the development of our literature will furnish a background for the study of a particular kind of writing during a certain period which is to follow.

The particular kind of writing to be discussed is the essay which as a literary type has not received any great amount of attention. Indeed, it seems to be rather neglected when its real importance is considered. One reason for this may be the fact that the essay is so varied and presents so many phases that a strict classification of prose works into essays and not-essays is very difficult. As the number of works in this line increase, a closer study and a stricter classification of the material will be needed.

This particular form of literary work, while standing as a pure type in so many instances, shades off into other forms by such imperceptible degrees that a great deal of penetration is and keen criticism is often necessary to distinguish the real literary essay. The form having proved a sort of omnibus for writers, we find it used for all sorts of purposes and in all kinds of subjects, from the learned critical or scientific essay to the rambling easy-chair production so characteristic of Lamb. Moreover, as has already been implied, this literary form is not distinct and clear-cut as are some others, as poetry for example, but may be found employing dialogue like the drama, or character portrayal similar to that of the novel, personal or

descriptive touches like those found in letters, or it may be closely allied to book reviews or newspaper editorials. A definition of the word essay in its broad meaning would necessarily include so much that we should really define little else but a prose composition. It is usually conceded that Johnson's famous definition of the essay is an excellent one--"A loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance." Richard Burton, in his study, "The Essay as a Mood and Form"* has given his own description of the essay which makes an excellent supplement to the definition of Johnson. He says, "Slight, casual, rambling, confidential in tone, the manner much, the theme unimportant in itself, a mood to be vented rather than a thought to add to the sum of human knowledge; the frank revelation of a personality--such has been and are the head marks of the essay down to the present day."* It is in this sense that I shall use the word in this paper, in which I shall discuss some personal essays.

A study of the essay must go back for its beginnings to the sixteenth century when Francis Bacon wrote his "Dispersed Meditations". These collections of terse, well-packed sentences that present to us much worldly wisdom and challenge our attention, are the first of an interesting line of essays in England and America. Owing to the fact that Bacon was influenced by Montaigne, we may regard this particular literary form as having its roots in France, although its branches now spread far and wide, giving shade and refreshment to multitudes of wayfarers.

*Burton, Richard. The Essay as Mood and Form. 1902. p.87.

In America, we find but little early effort in this field. Benjamin Franklin wrote some essays but nothing of permanent value in this line unless we count Poor Richard's Almanac, which slightly resembled some of Bacon's work. The year 1819 really marks the birth of the personal essay on this side of the Atlantic. Washington Irving's Sketch Book, though following the lines of the Spectator Papers in many ways, has, nevertheless a distinctly American tone and bears much the same relation to the American essay that the work of Addison and Steele does to the English essay.

The selection of any period in American literature for the study of the personal essay must necessarily be more or less arbitrary. The twenty years from 1840 to 1860 seem to offer some advantages over any other period, as they give the beginnings of well-defined movements in this particular field.

Transcendentalism produced some of the greatest thinkers and writers of America. Of all these thinkers and writers Ralph Waldo Emerson probably stands foremost today. While he is regarded as the great prophet of the awakened religious and philosophic thought of his day rather than as a personal essayist, the true essay element is by no means wanting in his work. Burton says, "In Emerson, too, we encounter a writer with a vocation for the essay, but having other fish to fry,--doubtless a loftier aim but a different. No man, English or American, has a literary manner which makes the essay an inspired chat more than the Concord sage--singer; and the inspired chat comes close to being the beau ideal of your true-blue essayist. With less strenuousness of purpose and just a bit more of human frailty--

or at least sympathy with the frail--here were indeed a prince of this kind!"* It is this essay note that I wish to speak. In 1841, appeared the first series of Emerson's essays, containing among others those on Self-Reliance, Compensation, Love, Friendship, Circles and the Over-Soul. Three years later the second series came out, and these two volumes give us the most important of Emerson's essay work. Of his other writings during this period, English Traits, 1856 and Conduct of Life, 1860 are the only ones that may be classed as personal essays.

From a perusal of these four books one rises feeling that he has met the man Emerson himself in that exalted mood where he seems continually to dwell. We find here a remarkable man--a unique man indeed--who impresses us strongly with his personality and yet keeps us at a certain distance. We admire his intellect and insight but are not drawn to him by tenderness or sympathy. We feel that his mind goes roving about among the eternities selecting here and there the truths which he wishes to impart. He makes strong, concise statements 'whose very truth is not quite true' but which nevertheless seize upon our attention and compel us to think. Some of his sentences ring out like a challenge. Here is a man in a new world without that deferential attitude toward the old which is apt to characterize those who have no past. "Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fulness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence then this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators

* Burton, Richard. Forces in Fiction. 1902. p.95.

against the sanity and authority of the soul."*

Emerson might well be called the prophet of the individual, so strong was his belief in the right and duty of every man to be himself. He believed in human nature because he was true to himself. His trust in the power of truth to lead men aright is shown by the following: "You will soon love what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, and if we follow the truth it will bring us out safe at last."**When he says that "self-trust is the essence of heroism",^o he again asserts his deep faith in the inner light. He was extremely optimistic and possessed a buoyant hopefulness in the ultimate triumph of the good. The following passage suggests Tennyson: "The age of the quadruped is to go out, the age of the brain and of the heart is to come in. The time will come when the evil forms we have known can no more be organized. Man's culture can spare nothing, wants all the material. He is to convert all impediments, all enemies into power. The formidable mischief will only make the more useful slave. And if one shall read the future of the race hinted in the organic effort of Nature to mount and meliorate and the corresponding impulse to the Better in the human being, we shall dare affirm that there is nothing he will not overcome and convert, until at last culture shall absorb the chaos and gehenna. He will convert the Furies into Muses and the hells into benefit."^{oo} Here, surely were a goal for culture worthy a Matthew Arnold. Although so

* Emerson, R.W. Self-Reliance. 1883. p.66.

** Ibid. p.64.

^o Ibid. p.200.

^{oo} Essays. 1883. v.6. p.158

spiritual and intellectual as to be somewhat cold, Emerson has a touch of humor and satire in his nature that appears without warning in his otherwise serious pages and brings a smile in the midst of grave discussions, as in the following: "Even the scale of expense on which people live, and to which scholars and professional men conform proves the tension of their muscle, when vast numbers are found who can lift this enormous load. I might even add, their daily feasts argue a savage vigor of body." The following is not only humorous but gives a characteristic little thrust at the frailty of human nature. "We tell our charities, not because we wish to be praised for them, not because we think they have great merit, but for our justification. It is a capital blunder; as you discover when another man recites his charities." *

A study of the illustrations and allusions used by Emerson would be very interesting and would throw much light on his mental interests. He is extremely wide-read and speaks of works in all literature from that of India to the mythology of the American Indians. He quotes from Latin and from Greek and draws allusions from the Bible. Nothing in literature is foreign or uninteresting to him. His illustrations are drawn from every field. Worms, an egg, birds, ships at sea, flowers and trees, the game of chance, Thor and Woden, mountains and stars serve his purpose. Man's occupations and woman's every-day common duties are useful to this great mind.

* Essays, 1st series. Heroism. 1888. p.207.

Emerson has sympathy with the soul-life of a child and appreciates the fact that child nature is peculiarly sensitive to truth of character in others. He has, moreover, his own characteristic way of expressing this sympathy. He says: "In my dealing with my child, my Latin and Greek, my accomplishments and my money stead me nothing; but as much soul as I have avails. If I am wilful, he sets his will against mine, one for one and leaves me, if I please, the degradation of beating him by my superiority of strength. But if I renounce my will and act for the soul, setting that up as umpire between us two, out of his young eyes looks the same soul; he reveres and loves with me." *

Emerson loved his home and cared little for travel except in the form of imaginary excursions which he enjoyed taking through the pages of his books. He lived contentedly at Concord and must have felt that it was good to be there, for he says: "But here we are; and if we will tarry a little, we may come to learn that here is best."** With this love for home he had a desire to be different from others which came to be an ideal with him. "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim. I hope it is something better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation."^o Again he says: "But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended

* Essays, 1st series. Oversoul. 1888. p.222.
** Ibid. Heroism. p.204-5.
° Works. 1883. v.2. p.53.

to settle anything as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no past at my back." *

No one can fail to find in Emerson's writings the high seriousness and absolute sincerity of the man. He did not mingle much with men in the hurly-burly of every day life, but he looked on this work-a-day world with a clear eye. If his words at times seem to lack that practical touch of which we are so fond, it is because he saw so much farther into man's nature that he was compelled to leave out of consideration the practical, which he felt was the lower and deal with the truly essential things of man's inner life.

And so example after example might be adduced to show that in his essays, Emerson was constantly expressing not only great philosophical truths but was also displaying his own personality in a most delightful way. It is Emerson that we meet throughout the pages, and this very fact adds a charm to his work which enhances many-fold the value and fascination of his writings.

It would be impossible to leave a consideration of Emerson without some reference to his style, for here in many cases the style is the man. The simplicity, sincerity and great earnestness of his character molds his straightforward, serious manner and stamps his whole work with a high seriousness which gives to a great extent the pleasure we find in Emerson's writing. It is said that our author

* Works. Circles. v.2. p.296.

was in the habit of jotting down in single sentences ideas which he had formulated after much study. Then, when, he wished to write an essay, he looked through these jottings, picking out the sentences which bore upon the subject in hand. Such a story may easily be believed by anyone who has read Emerson's works. Many of these sentences have served as texts for sermons and starting points for various long mental excursions. Often they are composed of short, packed clauses as, "Thus all concentrates: let us not move; let us sit at home with the cause."* Sometimes they are so condensed as to be obscure, and sometimes they are seemingly careless. Frequently we find striking antithesis expressed in the two parts of a sentence. "I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall."** Often he elaborates a thought by giving a series of coördinate clauses that present the same truth in different ways. Extreme opposites are often connected in the same sentence, as for instance, the Seraphim and tin peddlers. His diction is usually simple, filled with plain, homely, sometimes startling words.

Although as Benton says, Emerson has 'other fish to fry', he is nevertheless a pleasing, personal essayist and has done much to further the inspired chat in literature. High-minded and serious, he still has, as we found, sympathy with humanity and a wide interest in the affairs which concern his fellow men, despite the fact that he is an idealist. His personality asserts itself to a marked degree even

* Works. v.2. p.70.

** Essays. 1st ser. 1888. p.243.

in his philosophical writings. we find him a man of lofty ideals, strong optimism and keen intellect. Every page of his essays is indelibly stamped with his personality. His followers are not so lofty, of course, nor are they, as a rule, so charmingly independent and original, but they do suggest their master.

Of a character quite different from that of Emerson is the work of Donald G. Mitchell, perhaps better known as Ik Marvel. His most popular book, *The Reveries of a Bachelor*, appeared in 1850 and at once attained a great popularity which it has held to a remarkable extent. *Dream Life* appeared in 1851. Although very good, it has never received so much attention as the *Reveries*. The latter was not the author's first attempt at literature for he had published *Fresh Gleanings*, a book of travel in 1847, and had brought out a small periodical known as *The Lorgnette*. This periodical contained observations on life and the times from the point of view of the opera-goer, as well as essays which were written in an attractive, quiet, pure style.

We find in the author of the *Reveries* a much more approachable man than Emerson. He dwells on the earth and has not his head among the stars. He makes his genial, sympathetic personality felt from the very first sentence of the Preface. He takes the reader into his confidence at once in these words: "This book is neither more nor less than it pretends to be: it is a collection of those floating Reveries which have, from time to time, drifted across my brain. I have never yet met with a bachelor who had not had his share

of just such floating visions; and the only difference between us lies in the fact that I have tossed them from me in the shape of a Book.....

As for the truth that is in them, the world may believe what it likes; for having written to humor the world, it would be hard if I should curtail any of its privileges of judgment. I should think there was as much truth in them as in most Reveries." * And in Dream Life, which in some ways is not so successful a book as the Reveries, we find this: " I shall lay no claim to the title of moralist, teacher or romancist : my thoughts start pleasant pictures to my mind; and in a garrulous humor, I put my finger in the button-hole of my indulgent friend, and tell him some of them, giving him leave to quit me whenever he chooses." **

Mitchell expresses his fondness for Washington Irving and the Sketch Book, and it is quite evident that this work has had much influence on him. The plan of The Reveries and of Dream Life is different, but there is throughout a similar spirit of semi-serious moralizing, playful humor, deference toward woman, and exaltation of love. A dreamy, far-away mood, much like that in Irving's work, pervades the pages.

That the author was a wide-read man is evident from the illustrations he uses and the allusions that he makes. His fondness for nature and out-door life breathes through his descriptions of scenes and seasons. Fields, woods, mountains, streams, and ocean appeal to him. In his nature de-

* Reveries of a bachelor. 1868. p.9.

** Dream life. 1877. p.18.

scriptions, he picks out significant details. The account of the storm at sea is very vivid and stands out distinctly. He seems to catch the stmosphere of a scene. One paragraph from the Reveries will serve to illustrate this. "Noon in the country is very still: the birds do not sing; the workmen are not in the fields; the sheep lay their noses to the ground; and the herds stand in pools under shady trees, lashing their sides, but otherwise motionless. The mills upon the brook far above have ceased for an hour their labor; and the stream softens its rustles, and sinks away from the sedgy banks. The heat plays upon the meadow in noiseless waves, and the beech-leaves do not stir." * The details here used are few but are so well chosen that the whole scene stands out vividly before us. The series of short clauses heightens the effect of suspended noise and motion. The author takes us with him through various moods--from humorous and playfully cynical to the deeply serious. Sometimes the thought takes an unexpected turn, and we are led suddenly from gay to grave. Even in the lighter passages there is, somehow, a deeper undercurrent that touches the more serious nature. The prevailing tone of the book is sad.

It seems as Mitchell presents a rather selfish type of man, one who seeks only his own ends. His sketches of women on the other hand, show high types of character, and in some cases real unselfishness and heroism. He appreciates the sensitiveness of woman's nature and realizes that woman's

* Reveries of a bachelor. 1868. p.211.

love is an incentive to effort. "What a spur to effort is the confiding love of a true-hearted woman."* Bella is an example of a life made sad, if not shortened, by man's blind selfishness. We do not find the all absorbing devotion to one woman throughout the book which we are led by our training in novel reading, to expect. It may be that Mitchell's treatment of this subject is more true to real life. Far be it from me to judge in the matter.

The life of a New England boy is sketched so sympathetically that we feel the author must have had experiences like those he describes. But he looks back upon them with a sort of brooding sadness. We pity the little lad who is sent away from home in his early boyhood, to meet the world in a boarding school when he should be under the protecting care of his mother. "God have pity on the boy who learns to sob early."**

Love for home, for mother, and for all the little things of a happy home life is well expressed in his descriptions of domestic scenes. A pall seems to hang over the pages which tell of the death of loved ones. "Ah, what a gap in the world is made by the death of those we love! It is no longer whole, but a poor half-world, that swings uneasily on its axis and makes you dizzy with the clatter of its wreck!"° There is a restraint in many passages of deep feeling that is more effective than a more emotional expression could possibly be.

* Reveries of a bachelor. 1868. p.120-21.

** Ibid p.161.

° Ibid p.219

Occasionally, there is a jarring note, as in the following from the Reveries: "The undertaker comes with his bill for the dead boy's funeral. He knows your grief: he is respectful. You bless him in your soul. You wish the laughing street-goers were all undertakers." *

In Mitchell the mood is more and the thought very much less than in Emerson. In the latter, the author's philosophy is the important thing; in Mitchell it is incidental. There are hints now and then of a virile love for self-dependence, as shown by the following: "He is a weak man who cannot twist and weave the threads of his feeling--however fine, however tangled, however strained or however strong--into the great cable of Purpose, by which he lies moored to his life of Action." ** And again, "No man with any true nobility of soul can ever make his heart the slave of another's condescension." ° He pleads for generous religious views and asks that our religion be one that will attract, not repel, a boy's heart. It is sometimes said that deep affection is not so deep-seated in a man's nature as in a woman's, but Mitchell thinks otherwise, for he says: "There lies in the depth of every man's soul a mine of affection, which from time to time will burn with the seething heat of a volcano and heave up lava-like monuments through all the cold strata of his common nature." °°

- * Reveries of a bachelor. 1868. p.45.
- ** Ibid. p.65.
- ° Ibid. p.120.
- °° Ibid. p.243.

Mitchell's work, because of its conversational tone, its dreamy mood, its universal appeal and its simple, pleasing diction is easy to read. We feel a natural and human tone throughout his pages. His treatment of love is, for the most part, sympathetic and sensible. At times, however, a jarring note of selfishness creeps in when the author discusses the subject from a man's standpoint. Nature is often used effectively in describing moods and in such cases is treated in a sympathetic manner. Certain aspects of nature, as the woods, fields, and ocean appeal strongly to the author and are well described. We do not miss the deep philosophy of Emerson here, because Mitchell's personality is so attractive to us. We enjoy his mood, which he re-creates so effectively for us, and care not that he fails to lift us to such heights as does Emerson.

Of Lowell's writings of this period, 1840-1860, only a few pieces can properly be classed as personal essays. Cambridge Thirty Years Ago, 1844; A Moosehead Journal, 1853, and Leaves from my Italian Journal, 1854, comprise the list. In these writings Lowell is not like either Mitchell or Emerson. We find here a man of wide culture but not so philosophical as Emerson. He finds the concerns of every-day life of interest to him, and takes pleasure in the homely incident. There is more "every-dayness" here than in Emerson and more sunshine and earth than in Mitchell whose writings savor of shadow and dreamland. There is enough digression to give a pleasing essay touch, and humor and pathos are mingled in a very entertaining way. The many similes and com-

parisons give added life and interest to the thought. Often we find serious topics discussed in a half-bantering way, but with an undercurrent of real seriousness. The introduction of poetry anticipates a like practice by Holmes who uses his own productions so effectively in this way. Sympathy with people is clearly brought out and some of his sketches of characters are particularly good--perhaps because they are sketches and, after giving a few significant details, leave much to be supplied by the reader. A few sentences from the description of P. the Greek professor, will serve to illustrate. "Who that ever saw him, in his old age, like a lusty winter, frosty but kindly, with great silver spectacles of the heroic period, such as scarce twelve noses of these degenerate days could bear? He was a natural celibate, not dwelling 'like the fly in the heart of the apple' but like a lonely bee rather, absconding himself in Hymettian flowers, incapable of matrimony as a solitary palm-tree.....A thoroughly simple man, single-minded, single-hearted, buttoning over his single heart a single-breasted surtout, and wearing always a hat of a single fashion,--did he in secret regard the dual number of his favorite language as a weakness?"* who would not be interested in the old gentleman thus pleasingly portrayed?

Lowell had an inborn fondness for that which is old. "Now, my dear Storg, you know my.....inhabitiveness and adhesiveness,--how I stand by the old thought, the old thing,

* Cambridge thirty years ago. (In his Prose Works. 1899. v.1. p.91.)

the old place, and the old friend, till I am very sure I have got a better, and even then migrate painfully."* He loved the mysterious and lamented because "Year by year, more and more of the world gets disenchanted."** In order to counteract the disenchantment, he throws over common objects a mantle of imagery and so arrests the disillusionment. In *Leaves from My Journal*, he says: "It is well that we can be happy sometimes without peeping and botanizing in the materials that make us so. It is not often that we can escape the evil genius of analysis that haunts our modern daylight of self-consciousness (wir haben ja auf geklärt!) and enjoy a day of right Chaucer."° Oftentimes he invests a whole nature description with the idea of personification and so adds to the interest of the scene. "Mountains of every shape and hue changed their slow outlines ever as we moved, now opening, now closing round us, sometimes peering down solemnly at us over each other's shoulders, and then sinking slowly out of sight-, or, at some sharp turn of the path, seeming to stride into the valley and confront us with their craggy challenge,--a challenge which the little valleys accepted, if we did not, matching their rarest tints of gray and brown, and pink and purple, or that royal dye to make which all these were profusely melted together for a moment's ornament, with as many shades of various green and yellow." °°

It is refreshing to contrast the air of leisure which Lowell displays in his accounts of travel with our hurly-burly

- * Prose Works. 1899. v.1, p.51.
- ** Ibid. v.1. p.112
- ° Ibid. v.1. p.184.
- °° Ibid. v.1. p.171-72.

manner of dashing from place to place "doing" galleries and mountains. And it is a great relief to find a traveller who does not care for the beaten high-road of travel, but one, rather, who delights in the obscure and unknown and who is not afraid to express his honest opinion about what he sees, even when such opinion runs counter to that of the majority. Here is a man with enough self-reliance and trust in himself to differ from his fellows.

Perhaps the truest essay note in these works of Lowell is to be found in the Moosehead Journal. In the last paragraph of this he says: "Thus, my dear Storg, I have finished my Oriental adventures, and somewhat, it must be owned, in the diffuse Oriental manner. There is very little about Moosehead Lake in it, and not even the Latin name for moose, which I might have obtained by sufficient research. If I had killed one, I would have given you his name in that dead language. I did not profess to give you an account of the lake; but a journal, and, moreover, my journal, with a little nature, a little human nature, and a great deal of I in it, which last ingredient I take to be the true spirit of this species of writing; all the rest being so much water for tender throats which cannot take it neat."* This gives the real spirit of the whole Journal. We travel through the woods seeing bits of forest and stream by the way, to be sure, but interested primarily in the man Lowell himself and looking at nature through his eyes. We have here occasional touches

* Prose Works. 1899. v.1. p.41-42.

which show the author conversant with the world of society, but there is a spirit of kinship with the lowly that refreshes us. Of the woodsmen he says: "They appeared to me to have hewn out a short north-west passage through wintry woods to those spice-lands of character which we dwellers in the cities must reach, if we reach at all, by weary voyages in the monotonous track of the trades." *

Nature descriptions are often mingled with a human touch and often an unexpected humor is found. In describing the old man trying to strike a match in the night, he speaks of "Heat-lightnings of unsuccessful matches followed by a grumble of vocal thunder which I am afraid took the form of imprecation."** Love of beauty is evident in the discussion of our architecture which he deplores because of its unattractiveness. He summarizes the American spirit of hurry well in the following sentences: "We still feel the great push toward sundown given to the peoples somewhere in the gray dawn of history."° "We snatch an education like a meal at a railroad station."°° Although intensely patriotic, Lowell nevertheless sees with a singularly clear eye, the faults of his countrymen, and because of his patriotism, he endeavors in his own fashion, to correct the faults.

One of the most interesting features of the Moosehead Journal is the sketch of Uncle Zeb. He is, in many ways, a typical Yankee and we are delighted with his eccentricities. The following account of his conversational stratagems and

* Prose works. 1899. v.1. p.38.
** Ibid. p.12.
° Ibid. p.7.
°° Ibid. p.7.

manouvers is too good to be omitted. "Upon the lowlands and levels of ordinary palaver he would make rapid and unlooked-for incursions; but, provisions failing, he would retreat to these two fastnesses (his boots and the 'Roostick war) whence it was impossible to dislodge him, and to which he knew innumerable passes and short cuts quite beyond the conjecture of common woodcraft." *

We find in Lowell an essayist who reveals his personality through his pages in a way unlike that of Emerson or Mitchell, but one who pleases us none the less. The air of culture and refinement which is evident gives a richness not felt so strongly in Mitchell's work. The grace and finish of style is noticeable in contrast to Emerson's packed, abrupt and often ^{abrupt} style. The writer's attitude toward everyday affairs is that of one who mingles with men because he is interested in everything human and because he delights to come in contact with his fellow men.

We recognize in this particular work of Lowell's a suggestion of much of our later nature-writing, well illustrated in the work of John Burroughs, Thompson-Getton and others. Of course it is to be understood that Lowell's works in their entirety are not to be considered as forerunners of these writers, but in this one phase he does anticipate them.

In 1850 George W. Curtis submitted his Nile Notes of a Howadji to Mr. Harper who accepted and published them. These Nile Notes were the beginning of a series of works

* Prose works. v.l. p.17.

by Curtis. They contain some essay characteristics but are more properly classed as works on travel. In 1853 Mr. Curtis took charge of the Editor's Easy Chair in Harper's Magazine. The articles which he wrote for this department were editorial essays and touched on a great variety of topics but naturally dealt most frequently with questions of the day in politics, society, and the arts.

In 1856 appeared *Prue and I*. This book reminds one of Mitchell's *Reveries of a Bachelor and Dream Life*. It treats of love, though from the standpoint of a man who is happily married, than from that of a bachelor. A spirit of kindly sympathy with humanity as represented by the individuals pervades the pages and makes us feel the author's interest in all who suffer. The fact that he is a book-keeper in moderate circumstances reminds us at once of Lamb, and when he tells us that he 'keeps books by day but that books keep him by night', we feel the likeness still more. Then, too, there is the background of gentle melancholy relieved by a pleasing and kindly humor which is similar to Lamb's. Imagination is the author's strong point by means of which he is enabled to enjoy people in all classes of society. When he sees Aurelia roll by in her carriage to a dinner party, he immediately pictures himself seated at the board. When a splendid ship sails out of the harbor, he sees before him wonderfully interesting foreign countries peopled with strange men and women. In his descriptions of these, he shows the knowledge which he has gained by reading and travel.

Coupled with his imagination and fed by it is his love for the sea near which he was born. Much of his talk is of ships and many figures are drawn from them and from the sea itself. He pictures himself as a man having that strong desire to travel among new scenes so well expressed by the German word Wanderlust; but who, unfortunately is not able to leave the cares of business and so, wisely and philosophically, he sets about to enjoy his castles in Spain of which he gives glowing accounts. But there is an undercurrent of pathos running through all his enthusiasm. The effect of the pathetic is heightened by the figures of Titbottom and Bourne. These two men have deep longings which can never be satisfied, and which they therefore cover carefully from the common eye but reveal in flashes to their sympathizing friend, the author.

Optimism and a broad charity help him to bear his lot. On seeing a ship sail away, he consoles himself in his great desire to be on it, sailing for some beautiful land beyond the sea with the thought that the passengers may be seasick on the way.

His kindly feeling shows often. In one place he says: "It is my habit, --I hope I may say, my nature,--to believe the best of people rather than the worst."* His attitude toward old age is well summed up in the following: "And when I think that to have known one good old man--one man who, through the chances and rubs of a long life, has carried his heart in his hand, like a palm branch, waving all discords

* Prue and I. 1856. p.100.

into peace, helps our faith in God, in ourselves, and in each other, more than many sermons."*

Sometimes he enjoys sarcasm or irony but it is always of a gentle sort--never harsh or biting. Frequent figures add much to the pleasure of the reader for they are clear and illustrate the thought well. Curtis often uses long sentences with a careful balance of thought. Then again, he enjoys short sentences of the same or a similar structure and these used in a series produce an effect of monotony.

Curtis attracts us by his simple diction and straightforward style, by his appeal to our own inmost thoughts and feelings and by the thread of story running through his pages. His work is not profound in thought but it is very human, and portrays the author's mood so clearly that we feel ourselves at one with him. His philosophy is presented in a delightfully simple way that makes us forget that it is philosophy. But we realize, upon finishing *Prue and I* that life is worth while, that we have much to enjoy even if our neighbor has more and that a contented mind is a rich possession. The book is wholesome and refreshing in this restless, discontented day.

We come now to the last important writer of our period--Oliver Wendell Holmes. In 1857, the *Atlantic Monthly* was established and in this magazine Holmes began the publication of the *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. These papers were collected and published in book form in 1858. Two years

* *Prue and I*. 1856. p.115.

later he published *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*. In these two volumes we have what, so far as name and modd are concerned, may be considered the best essay work of these twenty years. Here is a frank and genial revelation of personality, and a wide diversity of subjects which gives the reader an idea of the writer's versatility and varied interests. Less lofty than Emerson, less dreamy and more chatty than Mitchell, less evidently learned than Lowell and less imaginative than Curtis, Holmes is supremely himself and as such is incomparable.

Here is a colloquial style which carries us from page to page, and, despite its conversational tone and digression gives us some sequence of thought. His own idea of what talk should be,--'the spading up of the ground for crops of thought'--tells us plainly that the purpose of the work is not entirely idle, but has for one aim the stimulation of our minds. Yet so indirectly, apparently, does the author set about accomplishing this end that we are never burdened by the purpose. We read because we are entertained. Perhaps his own attitude toward people, which he gives in the following passages, has some influence on our feeling toward him. He says: "I love nature and human nature, its thoughts, affections, dreams, aspirations, delusions."* "I hope I love good men and women; I know that they never speak a word to me even if it be of question or blame, that I do not take pleasantly, if it is expressed with a reasonable amount of human kindness." **

* *Professor at the breakfast table.* 1891. p.130
** *Ibid* p.131.

The plan of the work is a new one in American literature, and is really unique, for no one has been able to imitate it successfully. The author, as the the Autocrat in one book and as the Professor in the other, leads the discussion and conversation--reporting the remarks of the other boarders at the table from time to time. Through each book there runs a thread of a story which awakens our interest in the other characters, and this story is much enhanced by the author's comments on the various characters, and by his descriptions of them. But after all, it is the author himself in whom we are most interested.

Certain personal characteristics of the author are very evident in these books, and some brief discussion of them here may serve to show just how he reveals himself and just what he shows himself to be. The frequent digressions indicate his wide interests as well as the spirit of leisure which pervades the work. Repetition is, in his eyes, far from being a sin. "He must be a poor creature who does not often repeat himself.....Why, the truths a man carries about with him are his tools; and do you think a carpenter is bound to use the same plane but once to smooth a knotty board with, or to hang up his hammer after he has driven his first nail?" * Bearing this quotation in mind, we are not surprised to find the same thought expressed more than once, but never do we find it presented twice in exactly the same way.

As in Lowell, so in Holmes we find that preference, seemingly inborn in eastern men, for the thoroughly established.

* Autocrat of the breakfast table. 1891. p.7

The Autocrat says plainly that he prefers a man "who inherits family traditions and the cumulative humanities of four or five generations." Despite this preference, however, Holmes has a catholic interest and a kindly sympathy with all humanity and sees into the heart, not only of the man with family traditions, but also into the souls of all with whom he comes in contact. The tenderness which he expresses for the cripple and for the landlady in the Professor series illustrates this. Akin to this tender sympathy is his understanding of childhood, gained from his own childish experiences.

With his other conservative preferences goes that for language. He upholds the well established uses of language, and for that reason pretends to deprecate the use of puns. However, the reader finds these sports of diction occasionally here, but he will notice that they are always introduced as coming from some other character than the author. This situation often gives a touch of humor.

Anti-climax is a frequent device which gives interest and charm to the work. Unexpected turns in thought or conversation add much to the reader's enjoyment. Perhaps the following from the Professor will illustrate. "---I don't think the Model exactly liked this. She said,--a little spitefully, I thought,--that a sensible man might stand a little praise, but would of course soon get sick of it, if he were in the habit of getting much.

Oh, yes,--I replied,--just as men get sick of tobacco. It is notorious how apt they are to get tired of that vegetable.

---That's so!-- said the young fellow John,--I've got tired of my cigars and burnt 'em all up.

I am heartily glad to hear it,--said the Model,--I wish they were all disposed of in the same way.

So do I,--said the young fellow John.

Can't you get your friends to unite with you in committing those odious instruments of debauchery to the flames in which you have consumed your own?

I wish I could, said the young fellow John.

It would be a noble sacrifice,--said the Model,--and every American woman would be grateful to you. Let us burn them all in a heap out in the yard.

That a'n't my way,--said the young fellow John;--I burn 'em one't' time,--little end in my mouth and big end outside." *

We are interested to find that Holmes, although so closely connected with Boston, does not admire the kind of woman which we are apt to associate with that particular "Hub of the Universe." He likes, rather, the really womanly woman who has the gentle art of making all about her feel comfortable and kindly, one who indulges in flattery in its best sense. As for one who has not this fine quality, he dismisses her by saying she "isn't worth the trouble talking to, as a woman; she may do well enough to hold discussions with." Again he says: "The brain-women never interest us like the heart-women; white roses please less than red." He thinks that women are more deeply religious than men, and rightly so

* Professor at the breakfast table. 1891. p.172-73.

for "the real religion of the world comes from women much more than from men,--from mothers most of all, who carry the Key of our souls in their bosoms."

Holmes discusses the questions of love and marriage often in a half-bantering way, often very seriously. He appreciates the universal interest which these subjects hold and so touches upon them frequently. The most momentous question for a woman, according to Holmes, is whether the faults of the man she loves will drag her down or whether she will be strong enough to lift him to her level. The opposites which should attract are genius and character.

Holmes has a fondness for long descriptions with an allegorical interpretation. One notable illustration of this tendency is the passage from the Autocrat in which he describes the overturning of the stone in the field and then gives the significance of the stone and of the deadened grass and the crawling creature found beneath it. Another example is that of the cubes representing truth and the spheres which stand for falsehood which were offered to the small boy.

There is a touch of worldly wisdom in his pages which is not at all disagreeable. He maintains that money is a good thing, and that fashion does have a legitimate place in our lives. To use his own words: "But fashion and wealth are two very solemn realities, which the frivolous class of moralists have talked a great deal of silly stuff about." Again, speaking of the usual theory of the transitory nature of money, he says: "In fact, there is nothing earthly that

lasts so well, on the whole, as money." In his philosophy he doesn't ignore these mundane necessities but gives them their due place.

As we should expect from such a mind, we find here a plea for broad religious views rather than dogmatic narrowness. He was clear-sighted enough and honest enough to see the relative importance of laymen and clergymen for, speaking of the clergy, he says: "But the mainspring of the world's onward religious movement is not in them nor in any one body of men, let me tell you. It is the people that makes the clergy, and not the clergy that makes the people." He believes that each man must have his own belief and that the broad church is one whose creed is of the heart rather than of the head.

One of the chief sources of pleasure in Holmes is the balance of characteristics; local and national pride against a cosmopolitan spirit, human and pathos, love for humanity over against an irresistible desire to hold people up to a mild sort of ridicule, philosophical thought balanced by a good hard-headed business sense.

Holmes's essay work is delightful primarily for the personality of the author which it reveals. His chatty, humorous style is interesting and entertaining and holds our attention by its pleasant digression. The large number of subjects on which the author touches show him to be a man of wide interests, while the liberal views which he holds testify to his broad-mindedness. His sparkling humor and

unexpected turns which the thought often takes, together with frequent anti-climaxes, gives a brilliancy and freshness of tone that is not found elsewhere. Holmes, as seen through the pages of the Autocrat and of the Professor is one of our most attractive authors.

In concluding this study of the personal essay, a word should be said regarding the effect of the work of this period on subsequent essay work. As has been pointed out, the real roots of this particular literary form are to be found in France. From that starting point, we have suggested very hurriedly the development of the essay through Francis Bacon to Addison and Steele in England and thence through Washington Irving to America. Here the development has been along various lines. In Emerson it is philosophical. In Mitchell it gives us the reverie, the dreamy, soliloquizing piece; Lowell gives us a stronger nature touch and a more general, every day attitude, with a broad interest in everything human; Curtis draws us by his easy style and by the expression of many thoughts and longings which we all have experienced, and which he has put into words for us. Holmes gives us genial conversation on all sorts of topics from smoking cigars to that subject which interests us all and which absorbs nearly everyone at least once in his lifetime--marriage.

Naturally it is not to be supposed that each one of these five writers has reached the top rung of the particular ladder which he climbs here. It would argue badly for the growth and development of our literature if we were

forced to admit that all the writers who have come after and who are coming after were inferior to the forerunners.. To use Emerson's figure, "Is the acorn better than the oak?" Rather is it not true that these beginners planted seed which has sprung up, some thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred fold? Grant, if you will, that Emerson has given us some of the best thoughts of our age, is it not also true that many later day authors, drawing inspiration from this great source, have given us much that is more easily grasped and read with more relish by a greater number of people?

The nature essay, of which Lowell's Moosehead Journal may be said to be the forerunner, is well developed in much of Burrough's work and in that of Thompson-Seton and in several of VanDyke's pieces. There seems to be a general revival of interest in nature and an increased demand for the numerous works along this line which are continually appearing. Many of these books are greatly enriched by kodak pictures and by espacially attractive bindings. In some cases, these artistic features surpass the literary merit of the book, but as a rule the style is good and entertaining.

Some essays of the present day tend to a presentation of religious thoughts--not necessarily of a sectarian sort but broadly religious. Among these may be placed some of Van Dyke's work.

Critical pieces often assume the essay tone rather than the more scientific touch. Among writers who do this sort of thing are Howells, Mabie and Van Dyke.

Undoubtedly, the best essay work of the period is done

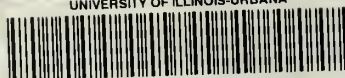
by Agnes Repplier who has given us delightful reading in her *Essays in Miniature* and *Essays in Idleness*. Here we find the true essay mood and style which is delightful for its own sake. One of the latest writers to attempt work in this field is Samuel McChord Crothers who has published a few pieces in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It is to be hoped that he will continue in this work, for his writing is most pleasing. It might be remarked in passing that the *Atlantic* is the one magazine which has fostered the production of essays. It alone has desired that sort of literature more consistently than has any other American periodical.

Let us hope that the personal essay, which has already received some attention from our authors, will continue to attract and that this most delightful kind will reach a high development worthy of its best traditions.





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 086825202